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The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Internet Marketing Trends: An Analysis of Website and Social Media Use  
in New York State's Equine Industry

by

Jessica R. Hooper

*A Thesis submitted*

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree  
in Communication & Media Technologies

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Literature Review .....	7
Research Questions .....	27
Context of Study .....	28
Method .....	30
Results .....	32
Discussion .....	48
Limitations .....	50
Recommendations .....	52
Conclusion .....	53
References .....	55
Appendices .....	60
Appendix A: Codebook .....	60
Appendix B: Coding Sheet .....	66
Appendix C: Equine Terminology .....	70

INTERNET MARKETING TRENDS: AN ANALYSIS OF WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA  
USE IN NEW YORK STATE'S EQUINE INDUSTRY

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Degree: Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

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**Abstract**

The Internet has evolved into a resource recognized by businesses and consumers as an effective means of marketing products and services. The rate at which businesses adopt online innovations, such as websites and social media varies based on factors such as comfort level and interest, and can be linked to Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation theory. This study investigates the extent to which horseback riding stables in New York State utilize websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market and promote equine services to consumers. General usage numbers are significantly higher than the 30% Internet use by farm businesses, which is likely a reflection of the increasing desire for riding stable consumers to receive information over the Internet.

*Keywords: Internet Marketing, Social Media, Service Industry, Riding Stable, Equine*

Internet Marketing Trends: An Analysis of Website and Social Media Use  
in New York State's Equine Industry

This research examines the extent to which riding stables in the equine industry in New York State utilize websites, Facebook, and Twitter as online marketing resources. While the current practices of a specific service industry are being evaluated, this research may also provide online marketing insights to other service industry professionals, or businesses considering the use of websites or social media as a part of their own online marketing presence.

Given the conventional nature of the equine service industry, the rate at which diffusion of online marketing innovation has occurred within the social system is a point of curiosity. Traditional means of marketing riding stables have often fallen to word of mouth marketing or face-to-face networking practices. While many equine businesses have begun to adopt the use of websites in recent years, the percentage using websites is unknown, as is the percentage using social media to share information about their businesses and services.

The Internet has evolved into a resource recognized by many businesses and consumers as an effective means of marketing products and services. Many online marketing options, especially those associated with social media, are often thought of as inexpensive when compared to more traditional print methods. Use of online marketing methods can provide a wealth of unique benefits for both business owner and consumer. The Internet is a versatile environment that creates opportunities for companies of all sizes. It is host to a wide range of online media and marketing resources. However, not all businesses are using the Internet to its full marketing potential, nor are they necessarily using it to achieve economic gains.

While it may be second nature for some businesses to adopt and embrace Web and social media marketing strategies, other industries are just starting to learn and take advantage of the benefits of Internet marketing. Since the roots of the equine industry stem from traditional farming, where roles tend to be labor intensive in nature, little time is left for technical dealings. However, today's consumers are growing up with technology such as websites and social media, and thus their expectations for how they will receive information are evolving. Consuming a service is no longer just about the service; it's also about the experience that accompanies that service.

This study will focus on examining the use of websites, Facebook, and Twitter by riding stables in the equine industry to analyze current trends in the use of online media for marketing purposes. The research examines equine businesses that offer similar services such as horse boarding, horse training, and riding lessons, and will be conducted using New York State businesses. There has been very little research to date on the use of websites or social media by equestrians for marketing purposes, in any sub-sector of the industry. This research will look to uncover trends that exist in the New York State equine industry, and will hypothesize what this may mean for similar service areas across the country.

It is unclear to what extent businesses in the equine industry are using the Internet to communicate with customers. Riding stables, in particular, may have a lot to gain through the use of websites, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of online media for marketing their services, as many horse enthusiasts are seeking an online means of obtaining information. To what extent do opportunities exist within this niche market for riding stables to expand current online communication practices?

As someone who has been heavily involved in the equine industry for more than twenty years, I have developed an interest in owning and operating a horseback riding stable in New York State. Given my background and current entrepreneurial goals, this study is of particular interest to me both for its insights into trends within the equine industry, and for its insights into the use of websites and social media as marketing resources by riding stables who may potentially become future competitors.

While there are many examples of Internet usage as a marketing tool by small businesses in general, there are few studies done on specific industries. This study will be significant to those who have an interest in learning more about the use of websites and social media for equine business marketing, as well as others in service industries who may be considering the use of websites or social media in their own businesses. To date, there has not been a comprehensive, industry wide or statewide study performed on how equine industries, more specifically riding stables, utilize websites and social media.

### **Literature Review**

Technology is often described as the most important influence on society today, and the Western world is filled with examples of how technology influences our lives (West & Turner, 2004). As we think about our typical day at home or work, we can visualize instances where we encounter technology: turning the TV on in the morning while the coffee is brewing, turning the computer on as soon as you arrive at work, checking your cell phone periodically throughout the day, and so forth. Many of us are engrossed in digital forms of communication on a daily basis.

In many cases, our interaction with technology has become second nature, and where there once was a sense of commodity related to technology, there is now a form of expectation.



Our day-to-day casual interactions with technology carry over into our overall expectations of how we will communicate with the world around us. Today's "net generations" are growing up not ever having known a world without the Internet, and thus it becomes somewhat of a societal responsibility for service-based businesses to understand how communication through different digital mediums affects the message that we are attempting to deliver.

### **Growth of the Internet**

The Internet became popular with consumers during the mid-1990s, and during that time, HTML pages contained read-only content. We have seen the Web evolve and change at an amazing pace over the past decade (Compesato and Nilson, 2011), and the Internet continues to revolutionize the computer and communications world like nothing before it. Today the Web has become the de-facto method for general information gathering (King and Baeza-Yates, 2009). It has become a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers, all without regard for geographic location (<http://www.internetsociety.org/>). It has also irrevocably transformed the field of marketing through the introduction of new products, new audiences, and new strategies for reaching those audiences (Mohamed, et al., 2004).

The modern Internet has become a ubiquitous space that has long since removed its read-only restrictions, enabling people to collaborate by dynamically updating, creating, and sharing content with other users (Compesato and Nilson, 2011). Consumers can now access the Internet on an array of devices including personal computers, cell phones or other mobile devices, and even televisions and gaming consoles. As Americans, we want to run our applications from

anywhere and everywhere possible so that we can multi-task and connect to our social circles and never miss a beat. Convenience – we want an app for that!

Statistics from the Pew Research Center (2012) state that 85% of American men and women currently use the Internet, with 58% usage in the 65+ age category, 85% usage in the 50-64 age category, 93% in the 30-49 age category, and a dominating 96% in the 18-29 age category (<http://www.pewinternet.org>). From these statistics, we can conclude that the typical American consumer is on the Internet, and the younger the consumer, the more likely they will be to expect an Internet presence from those they choose to interact with.

### **Emergence of Web 2.0**

Web 2.0 refers to the collection of emerging Web technologies and methodologies, including social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. The term Web 2.0 is characterized by online technologies that are more participatory, more semantic, and more real-time in nature (Tenenbaum, p.53) than their predecessors, which were viewed more like online dictionaries and repositories of static information (Compesato and Nilson, 2011). Web 2.0 is heavily oriented toward content generation by people who collaborate and share their content and information (Compesato and Nilson, 2011).

It has been suggested that humans have a symbiotic relationship with technology; we create technology, and technology in turn re-creates who we are (West & Turner, 2004). The origins of this research trace back to well-known theorist, Marshall McLuhan (1964), who coined the phrase “the medium is the message.”

When considering the basis of McLuhan’s research, one can conclude that the power and influence that particular mediums have over society should be considered when looking at

approaches to marketing, particularly Internet marketing, which is heavily dependent upon functional technology. The evolution of new mediums such as social media sites, blogs, and user forums changes our expectation of how and when we will be able to communicate and interact with one another, including the ways in which we interact with businesses and their services. Social computer resources such as social networking sites have seen a significant increase in popularity and are considered to be at the foundation of the Web 2.0 movement (Ward, 2011).

According to McLuhan (1964), as the age of information demands the simultaneous use of all of our faculties, we discover that we are most at leisure when we are most intensely involved. It is noted that this has historically been a common trait amongst well-known artists across the ages. Interestingly enough, almost a half-century after McLuhan published his research, we find ourselves immersed in a world of multi-tasking, which in many ways can be contributed to our frequent use of the Internet.

While the Internet has served as a jumping off point, online media associated with the term Web 2.0, or what I like to refer to as the “engaged Internet,” has moved us well beyond passive information consumption into an environment where the consumers are contributing, personalizing, and even creating content components of the World Wide Web. They are shaping their own experiences. Much of this activity has taken place through social media and other collaborative online media such as wikis and blogs.

### **Social Networking**

Social computing tools such as social networking sites are being used by both private and public entities to add enterprise value. From a business perspective, social computing tools can

be used internally to increase employee collaboration, or externally to attract customers and increase organizational visibility (Ward, 2011).

Consumers have come to expect Web applications to interact with their data in real-time, similar to interactions experienced in face-to-face conversations. Several hundred million people belong to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and that number will probably exceed the one billion mark in the near future (Compesato and Nilson, 2011). Social media has the unique ability of allowing people to become acquainted quickly without ever meeting in person, and Guenther (2011) concludes that the faster they get to know you, the faster they are likely to like and trust you.

A social networking site is an online community that lets people meet, interact, and collaborate in various ways, such as sharing information and photos, and exchanging ideas. Social networks are similar to clubs and other organizations, but the term "social networks" is frequently associated with an online group, such as Facebook (Compesato and Nilson, 2011).

Social network groups are typically formed around people's common interests or hobbies. There are similar functionalities that people take advantage of on social sites such as Facebook and Twitter, including logging into their account(s), checking messages or news feeds, reviewing status updates from friends, or viewing information on upcoming events. These online networks are typically free to join and try to attain "viral growth" to increase their user base (Compesato and Nilson, 2011).

Social networking sites appeal to different audiences, and are designed to cater to different demographics (Compesato and Nilson, 2011), which is an important consideration for businesses that may be thinking about the use of social media for marketing related purposes.

According to the August 2012 survey performed by the Pew Research Center, 66% of Internet users access social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+ when they are on the Internet. Additionally, 84% of Internet users look for information on a hobby or interest while online. This is a very large percentage of the American consumer base, and according to Pew (2012) the only two items that ranked higher were using the Internet to send or read email and using search engines to find information, both ranking at 91%.

### **Facebook**

In 2009, Facebook exceeded 350 million users worldwide to become the largest social networking site in the world (Compesato and Nilson, 2011). That is an amazing statistic considering the platform was initially developed just for college students. Today, Facebook continues to be the most widely used social media platform worldwide, boasting approximately 955 million monthly active users, as of June 2012 (<http://newsroom.fb.com>).

Facebook's mission is clear: to make the world more open and connected (<http://newsroom.fb.com>), and they have done just that. They have connected millions of users, including friends, families, and businesses. This level of connectivity provides a wide array of benefits for businesses looking to market their services to new customers, as well as an ability to stay connected with current customers.

While the Facebook News Feed is arguably the central part of the experience for most users (Compesato and Nilson, 2011), the popular social networking site also allows users to post and upload photos, tag themselves and friends in messages and photos, and interact with third party applications to create a more robust social experience.

Facebook Pages are commonly used to promote businesses on the social media site. Pages are public profiles that let businesses and other organizations create an online presence and connect with the Facebook community. When someone “likes” a page, they’ll see updates from that page shared in their news feed. When someone “likes” or comments on a page post that activity may be shared with their Facebook friends, ultimately increasing the page’s exposure and reach (<http://newsroom.fb.com>).

In addition to Facebook pages, some businesses may also find benefit in Facebook Ads. Facebook Ads allow marketers to show graphic or text-based advertisements to an audience based on demographic factors such as location, age, gender, education, work history, and the interests’ people have chosen to share on Facebook (<http://newsroom.fb.com>).

## **Twitter**

While Facebook boasts the largest number of online community members of any social media service on the Web today, Twitter is also growing in popularity. The popular micro-blogging network that allows users to post messages, called "tweets," up to 140 characters in length, operates on a global queue that is accessible to millions of people. The concept behind Twitter could be considered similar to Short Message Service (SMS)-based text messaging on cell phones (Compesato and Nilson, 2011).

Twitter offers businesses the ability to influence and participate in conversations to drive consumer actions through integrated campaigns, delivering results throughout the marketing funnel. Additionally, businesses can use Twitter to listen to what others are saying and gather market intelligence and insights (<https://business.twitter.com>).

With millions of people now “tweeting,” in upwards of 20 different languages (<https://business.twitter.com>), businesses continue to look for ways to make use of the micro-blogging phenomenon to inform and connect with consumers. Twitter expects its user base to grow to nearly 250 million active users by the end of 2012 (Bennett, 2012). Twitter conversations can provide a rich canvas and a powerful context in which to connect business’ messages and brands to what people are talking about in real-time (<https://business.twitter.com>). Further, the Twitter business website states that, “If you are running a business, it is likely that people are already having conversations about your business somewhere on Twitter.”

### **The Internet and Service Businesses**

In order to differentiate and allow consumers to find value in services, businesses must truly understand their services at the core and understand what benefits consumers derive from the existence of those services, which are ultimately created through the sharing of competencies and skills for the benefit of others either consuming or absorbing to build their own skills (Sampson & Froehle, 2006).

Further, Terrill & Middlebrooks (2001) report that service differentiation is only possible if a company remains clearly defined for a period of three to five years in relatively stable markets. Businesses will likely find an advantage in planning a long term marketing strategy, especially small businesses that may not have the means for establishing an intense marketing campaign out of the gate. This is where resources like the Internet may be able to play a significant role in reduced spending in experimental marketing efforts.

In general, marketing strategies for service-based businesses differ from those associated with product-based businesses. Service quality, standards, and customization vary based on the

degree of competence associated with a given business. It is suggested that to create the most customized level of service, client participation and input through various channels including technological value chains is imperative (Sampson & Froehle, 2006). The ability of the marketer to put people back into the marketing equation by focusing on the intangibles, and addressing new, intense, or unmet customer needs may help service businesses achieve competitive advantage (Terrill & Middlebrooks, 2000). Service marketers should ask themselves what would customers remember about their actual experience.

Since services are generally produced and consumed at the same time, with differing levels of “people-based” interaction, the potential for variability in service delivery is much more likely than in a tangible goods scenario where goods are typically produced, then sold, then consumed. Simultaneous production and consumption means that the service provider is often physically present when consumption takes place (Barry, 1980), thus allowing real-time assessment of service satisfaction.

When determining a marketing strategy, it is important to market to the right customers, and that is done best by narrowing the target customer segments. There are six mechanisms which can be utilized to encourage the “right” customers: communicate only in places where your target customers will see you, offer different levels of service for different types of customers, offer different pricing for different types of customers, set expectations in advance and tailor the services and environment for your target customer, provide more convenient access for target customers, and pre-screen customers and accept only those that meet certain criteria (Terrill & Middlebrooks, 2001). Many of these practices are already common in the equine industry.



**Internet and Social Media Marketing**

Internet marketing tactics can be utilized to grow and maintain the customer base in a service-based business, but they may also have an added benefit. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, not only present marketing opportunities, but also new strategies to enhance customer experiences and assist in differentiating services. The use of these new technologies as a means of communication could be considered one approach to extending current service offerings. In a service-based business, the customer becomes an element of the service system, as does the technology that allows the customer to interact with the business (Maglio and Kieliszewski, 2010).

While much dispute has been had over how the Internet has or has not changed traditional views of marketing, one thing is certain, consumer expectations about convenience have been forever altered, and competitive responses now happen in real-time (Mohammed, et al., 2004). As a society, we are bombarded with hundreds of advertising messages every day, and thus our brains have developed methods to screen out and ignore a huge portion of the promotional messages we see. It is often much easier to make contact with customers when they are looking for what your business sells or offers, rather than trying to force them to think about your business when you want them to (Nicholson, 2011). The Internet allows customers to do just that, search for services on a 24/7 schedule, and follow up on service questions in their own time. As noted earlier, 91% of Internet users are using search engines to access information (<http://www.pewinternet.org>), making it very important for service businesses to pay attention to search engine indexing.

When the consumer does make their way to an established website, it is crucial that the website reflects the quality of the business and accurately represents its services. Without these key elements, it is unlikely that visitors will be converted into customers. “The hub of all social media endeavors for your business is your practice’s website,” states James Guenther, DVM and owner of Strategic Veterinary Consulting in Asheville, NC (2011).

Consumers go through several stages as they learn about a service or product. In the awareness stage consumers typically have some basic information, knowledge, or attitude about a business but have not yet initiated any contact. As we move forward to the exploration/expansion stage, the consumer and business begin to initiate communications and actions that enable an evaluation of whether or not to pursue a deeper connection. The commitment phase then invokes a sense of obligation, responsibility or loyalty to the business on the part of the consumer (Mohammed, et al., 2004). Internet marketing may be a means for businesses to make more personalized connections with consumers, helping consumers feel more committed, and even proud, to be associated with a particular service business.

The Internet introduces the advent of “community” and “branding” concepts to marketing practices, where community is viewed as the level of interaction that unfolds between users, and branding is viewed as a critical component of building long-term relationships on the Internet (Mohammed, et al., 2004). Social networks can play a large role in helping businesses achieve these goals. Creating a similar look and feel for all online marketing elements such as websites, Facebook, and Twitter can be one example of how a business may be able to create stronger brand awareness.

Increasingly, many forms of customer service are being delivered with the help of technology (Barnes, Dunne, Glynn, 2000). While business websites and social media presences may not be providing a direct service, one could argue that they are providing an indirect service of informing and engaging the customer to the extent that the individual customer desires. The Internet poses a unique means for consumers to interact as much or as little with businesses as they want, and all from the privacy of their own homes.

Websites and social media can produce a feeling of self-service among customers, even if they are not directly receiving the service, but rather, learning about the service in an on-demand way. Social media such as Facebook or Twitter are unique in that they actually do provide human interaction, even if it is typically in an asynchronous format.

Previous research on the adoption of computer technology has shown that perceived ease of use and “fun” influence usage intentions; additionally, research shows that customers who view technology-based service as easy to use, reliable, and enjoyable also perceive higher service quality in such delivery options (Barnes, Dunne, & Glynn, 2000).

In utilizing technology not as a means for providing a primary service, but as a means for providing supplementary communication, the customer can potentially achieve the best of both worlds. However, the message delivered through the technology, be it a website or form of social media, needs to be clear and concise so that the customer has clear expectations for these and other potential relationship forming online avenues. A successful relationship marketing strategy will ultimately create an environment where the customer is willing to stay with a service provider even in the face of attractive, viable, and available alternatives (Patterson & Ward, 2000). The idea of an organization developing relationships with their customers is not new, but

the advent of social media has added new means for creating ongoing relationships with customers.

According to research conducted by Experian Marketing Services (2011), approximately 129 million Americans access social media in a typical month, where “social media” was defined as social or professional networking sites, photo or video sharing sites, online forums or message boards or social tagging sites. The same study determined that 98% of online adults in the 18-24 age group were accessing social media at least monthly, if not more frequently. Social media is doing much more than just connecting individuals; it also provides consumers with a personalized way to connect to companies, brands, media and vice versa, making it an undeniable marketing tool (Experian, 2011).

Regarding frequency of visits, Experian (2011) found that as of August 15, 2011, 57% of active Facebook users (those using the site at least once per month) report making more than 15 monthly visits to the site. In addition, 46% of active Twitter users report 16 or more monthly visits to the site.

In the 2012 Social Media Marketing Industry Report performed by Social Media Examiner (Stelzner, 2012), it was reported that 83% of marketers felt that social media was important to their business. An overwhelming 94% of marketers surveyed indicated that they were employing social media for marketing purposes, with 59% using social media for 6 hours or more on a weekly basis.

The top two benefits of social media marketing are increasing exposure and increasing traffic. However, marketers have also indicated benefits such as gaining marketplace insight, generating leads, development by loyal fans, improved search rankings, growth of business

partnerships, reduced marketing expenses, and improved sales (Stelzner, 2012). Given these benefits, it is easy to see why marketers would consider social media as a desired way to further market their business through the Internet.

The top five commonly used social media tools, as reported by Social Media Examiner, were Facebook (92%), Twitter (82%), LinkedIn (73%), Blogs (61%), and YouTube or other video (57%). Additionally, Google+, Photo sharing sites, Forums, Social bookmarking/news sites, Geo-location, and Daily deals appeared on the list but were much less widely utilized by marketers (Stelzner, 2012).

The statistics of Internet usage among today's American society is somewhat overwhelming. Only a very small percentage of Americans are not online, with 31% of those not online indicating that they just weren't interested (<http://www.pewinternet.org>), while the majority seem to agree that the Internet is a useful resource that they use on a regular basis.

While a large number of Americans are online, using the Internet for their own personal means, these statistics do not represent the number of businesses that are marketing their services online. It is noted that the rate at which businesses adopt innovations, such as use of the Internet for marketing, vary based on a number of variables.

### **Diffusion of Innovations**

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory (2003) can help us to better understand why different businesses adopt innovation at different rates. According to Rogers, diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system.

Knowledge is gained when an individual, or business, learns of the innovation's existence and gains some understanding of how it functions. In the scenario of Web and social media use for marketing, we can observe the evolution of the Internet to better understand how diffusion has taken place within different service industries.

The social system itself, which may consist of individuals, informal groups, organizations, or subsystems (Rogers, 2003) will affect the innovation's diffusion in several ways. Members of the social system will make collective innovation decisions, whether coherently or otherwise, to adopt or reject an innovation to establish a norm for the social system.

Businesses that choose to adopt new innovations, when there is a high degree of uncertainty still surrounding that innovation, are considered Innovators (Rogers, 2003). Those who adopt an innovation shortly following the Innovators are the Early Adopters, who have the highest degree of opinion leadership in most social systems. The Early Majority follows as an important link in the diffusion process, providing interconnectedness in the social system's interpersonal networks. Next is the Late Majority, or those who approach the innovations with a skeptical or cautious air. Finally the Laggards, who are suspicious, even of innovations that have been proven successful, typically make their decisions on what has been done previously by others.

Little research has been done to determine where the equine industry may fall within these Adopter Categories; however, some research on the larger subset of farming industries has been gathered. Since farming is the root industry of most equine small businesses, we can assume some trends based on findings within the farming industry as a whole. According to the 2005 Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS), only 30 percent of U.S. farmers

indicated that they used the Internet as part of their business, which would likely position most farmers as part of the Late Majority category.

Briggeman & Whitacre (2010) explain that reasons for non-use amongst farm businesses can be varied, and may include reasons such as unfamiliarity with the technology, lack of a computer, no perceived need, concerns about Internet connections or poor Internet service, security, or cost. These concerns further endorse the likelihood for farm businesses to fall within the Late Majority - adopting Internet marketing as an innovation only after it was considered a tried and true means for connecting with consumers.

Further, Internet adoption decisions among farm businesses are usually modeled based on a number of farm and individual characteristics, including farm size, measures of farm/non-farm income, education, age, and interest (Phillips, Kolb, & Bicknell 2011). These and other factors may have enough influence to prevent the implementation of technical innovations such as online marketing.

### **Internet Marketing by Gender**

Much of the research available on gender specific use of the Internet is related to consumer purchasing practices, and not business owner marketing practices. It is unknown whether the gender demographics of a business owner will affect their tendencies to utilize online marketing strategies to promote their business.

In a recent press release by J.D. Power and Associates (2012), it was stated that men and women use the Internet differently when shopping online for products and services. Additionally, a survey performed by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005) reported that more than men, women are likely to be enthusiastic online communicators.

Research findings also indicate that men are typically more interested and comfortable with Internet technologies than women. Each gender also places a different value on their online experience; men tend to value the breadth of experience offered, whereas women tend to value the opportunity to enrich relationships (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005).

Given the interests and tendencies of women Internet users, one might deduce that these behavioral trends or desires to use the Internet in a way that helps build or support relationships may carry over as a part of the woman business owner's marketing strategy. If this concept proved true, women business owners might be more likely than men to pursue interactive Internet marketing strategies such as Facebook, Twitter, or other forms of social media.

Due to the more static nature of websites, determining whether men or women would have a stronger tendency to use websites as a marketing resource might be more difficult than predicting social media tendencies. Research indicates that both men and women actively utilize the Internet for shopping and researching information on products and services (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005).

### **Current Practices in the Equine Industry**

Current marketing tools in the equine industry consist of advertising online (including personal websites), networking (or word of mouth), annual sales, print ads in magazines and journals, and participation in events such as large horse expos or small community events. One of the biggest success factors for a horse owner or equine business is access to a professional network; without such a network it is very difficult to become successful (Phillips, Kolb, & Bicknell 2011).



In a recent survey performed by Linda Nicholson (2011), an independent marketing consultant, a sampling of the equine industry's marketing practices was taken to help managers of horse businesses, or businesses connected to the equine industry, find better ways to market their businesses. Though the survey was small ( $N=82$ ), very few of these types of studies have been performed, and its information is still relevant in shedding some light on the current state of Internet marketing in the equine industry.

Of those who responded to the survey, 58 people (70.7%) were based in the United States, while the other 29.3% was based in other, primarily European, countries (Nicholson, 2011). It is noted that since marketing practices may differ by country, and the results could not be separated further, Nicholson's data represents more than just trends within the United States.

Respondents to the survey, which included professionals involved in the equine industry, rated the following marketing methods as good or excellent for likelihood to work well in the equine industry (Nicholson, 2011):

1. Referrals from clients – 88.9%
2. Networking – 61.3%
3. Referrals from other horse businesses – 55.0%
4. Websites – 51.3%
5. Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.) – 50.7%

It is noted that referrals from clients and networking rank among the highest, which follows the historical “word of mouth” marketing approach that has been a part of the equine industry for decades. Interestingly, websites and social media do appear on the top five list, so

the question becomes, are people actually using these methods, and more specifically, are riding stables utilizing these resources to help achieve their full marketing potential?

When asked what difficulties were encountered when marketing a horse business, survey respondents conveyed that lack of time to do what is needed, customer attitudes, and concerns over marketing effectiveness were the biggest challenges. Additionally, 54.9% of respondents noted that it is more difficult to make money because economic struggles are leading to less customers, 47.6% noted that customers are more price conscious, and 29.3% reported that there are more competitors fighting for business in the market (Nicholson, 2011). With all of these things considered, equine businesses should be considering use of the Internet as a potentially high visibility marketing resource that could assist in service growth, or add value to customer experience.

Helping the equine community become more involved with activity on the Internet will likely require members of the community to unite in some way, whether it be through Facebook or other forms of social networks. In one example, an organization in the UK formed an awards initiative for equestrians in 2010, and has since been soliciting the feedback of the equine community to award honors in 15 different categories such as Best Use of Facebook, Best Use of Twitter, Best Use of Social Media by a Professional Rider, Best Use of Social Media by a Newcomer, and several other categories. In the spirit of social media, finalists submit their acceptance speeches online to be included as a part of an online awards ceremony. In 2012, 14,134 people voted for the finalists, and the awards Facebook page boasted 9,781 fans. There were 124 countries involved in the voting process, with the top five countries being UK, USA, Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands (<http://www.equestriansocialmediaawards.com>).

This type of initiative is certainly one that excites and unites the equestrian community around the use of social media for business related purposes. More initiatives such as this one that allow thousands of members from the diverse equine community to come together around a similar topic are likely to encourage additional interest in use of the Internet for marketing among horse enthusiasts.

It is difficult to find specific information on how riding stables or other areas of the equine community are using websites specifically to market their businesses. In analyzing the 2012 American Horse Council Industry Directory (2011), it was noted that there was a section for shared industry website information, however this section did not include information on the equine industry as a whole, nor did it include information on riding stables by state, making it difficult to gain a perspective on overall website use by riding stables. Probably one of the best resources found was the Riding Resource website, a fully-searchable online directory of horseback riding stables and tack shops and stores, which gives users access to a database with over 12,000 stables, searchable by specific interest criteria (<http://www.ridingresource.com>). However, while listings are made available on this website, specific statistics by state are not available.

Although usage numbers for Facebook and Twitter are seemingly high, few equine businesses are taking full advantage of social media to increase revenue and brand awareness (Guenther, 2011). Guenther's (2011) article also alludes to the fact that many businesses may not be pursuing social media means for marketing their businesses because it is unfamiliar or requires a strategic plan to be successful, which few equine businesses feel they have the time or resources to develop.

Professional marketers are beginning to “notice” the equine industry as a niche that may not be making full use of social media, and a handful of third party groups such as Equestrian Social Media Today (<http://equestriansocialmedia.com>) and Equestrian Professional (<http://www.equestrianprofessional.com>), have begun to offer services such as social media boot camp and online training. While many of these services look as though they would be useful, many of them are not free and require a one-time fee or membership.

Whether business owners decide to take advantage of these professional marketing services or not, one thing is certain, to be successful in the equine industry a business owner must have the correct resources. For example, successful horse trainers must have the knowledge of training gained through experience, and a trainer must have access to a facility allowing them everything they need to succeed (Phillips, Kolb, & Bicknell 2011). A business owner’s network of resources and skills become invaluable over time.

### **Research Questions**

This research will address the following questions in an effort to unveil website, Facebook, and Twitter usage and marketing trends within the equestrian community, by examining riding stable usage statistics in New York State.

RQ1: What percentages of riding stables in New York State are currently utilizing websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market services?

RQ2: In what ways are riding stables in New York State utilizing websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market services?

RQ3: What percentage of riding stables are linking to Facebook and Twitter from the homepage of their existing Website?

RQ4: Is there a correlation between owner gender demographics and use of websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market riding stable services in New York State?

### **Context of Study**

According to the American Horse Council, the horse industry is a very large and important part of our national, state, and local economies. A 2005 study performed by Deloitte Consulting LLP for the American Horse Council found that there were 9.2 million horses in the United States, and over 4.6 million Americans involved in the industry as owners, service providers, employees, and volunteers - with tens of millions more participating as spectators of equestrian sports. The industry has a \$102 billion impact on the U.S. economy, and provides approximately 460,000 full-time equivalent jobs (American Horse Council, 2005).

According to Research USA database findings (September 2012) there are approximately 8,684 riding stables registered as businesses in the United States. These businesses are responsible for several thousand jobs and billions of dollars' worth of economic impact on the United States each year. New York State is home to approximately 5% of the United States' riding stable service industry population, and is fourth in the U.S. industry following only California (847), Puerto Rico (535), and Florida (463).

The New York equine industry produces goods and services valued at \$1.4 billion annually, with the national equine industry having an even larger \$2.4 billion impact on the New York economy. Over 200,000 horses reside in New York State and more than 152,000 New Yorkers are involved in the industry as owners, service providers, employees, volunteers, or spectators (American Horse Council, 2005).

Horseback riding stables offer a variety of services such as boarding, training, and riding lessons. Many of these services are what would be considered “high contact,” meaning that there is a high level of interaction between the service provider (stable owner or riding instructor) and the customer. The industry itself is known for being labor intensive, and to many horseback riding is often viewed as the “sport of kings,” or an activity in which only the wealthy may partake.

While it may be true that to compete at the upper levels of this industry, a strong monetary backing is often required, The American Horse Council reveals that approximately 46% of horse owners are middle class consumers who have annual incomes between \$25,000 and \$75,000 (<http://www.horsecouncil.org>).

According to Google in 2011, the term “horse riding lessons” was searched approximately 18,100 times per month in the United States, “riding lessons” was searched 60,500 times per month, “horse training” was searched 40,500 times per month, and “horse farms” was searched 49,500 times per month (Nicholson, 2011).

One conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that there are many equine consumers using the Internet to find riding stables or related services. Based on this information, riding stable facilities that have a web presence are more likely to be viewed by many potential consumers in one month’s time than those who do not. Nicholson’s (2011) research indicates that 82.3% of those surveyed have their own website.

Although websites may be present for some riding stables, making that website actually work as a functional marketing tool means deciding which search phrases you want to target and then taking the necessary steps to be ranked highly in search engines like Google (Nicholson,

2011). The act of indexing your website appropriately so that it will come up on the search engine lists gives your website a better likelihood of getting in front of the consumer. For many horse businesses this is probably one of the biggest challenges that they may need to overcome.

### **Method**

The population of this study consists of 205 riding stables in New York State. The sample was taken from a collection of 435 riding stables listed as operational businesses in New York State during September 2012. The representative sample size was determined through use of *The Table for Determining Sample Size from a Given Population*, provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Riding stable listings were requested through the SUNY Brockport, NYS Small Business Development Center, and were retrieved through the online Reference USA database on September 24 and 27, 2012, respectively. The listings encompass riding stables classified in the database by the search terms Stables, Equestrian Centers, and Riding Academies.

In order to select a random sample, all 435 riding stables were arranged in alphabetical order in a spreadsheet and assigned a random number generated by an online random number generation website (<http://www.randomizer.org>). The riding stables were then resorted numerically and the first 205 stables were selected for use in the sample. A count of similar equestrian businesses across the United States was provided by state, but did not include business name or demographic data due to access policies. While conducting the research, it was determined that some of the businesses on the listing pulled from the Reference USA database were inappropriately or inaccurately categorized, and were not in fact riding stables. Eight businesses were removed from the final analysis because they were categorized as equine events,

tack shop or riding supply distributors, or were not related to equine business. The final analysis was performed on 197 riding stables.

Upon determining the sample, a content analysis was performed to determine whether or not each of the riding stables had a website, Facebook page, or Twitter account. Additional aspects of the riding stable websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts were gathered. For the websites, components such as access to relevant marketing information, riding stable discipline, and links to social media were evaluated. For Facebook, components such as last page post by page owner and visitor, as well as number of followers, were gathered. Finally, for Twitter, components such as number of followers and date of last tweet were collected. Additionally, riding stable owner gender demographics were evaluated to determine whether there was any correlation between owner gender and the use of websites, Facebook, and/or Twitter for business marketing.

The Google search engine was used exclusively for collecting website data, and the riding stable websites were searched for by staged search parameters, where additional parameters (found in Appendix A) were added after each unsuccessful search. If a business website was not found in the top ten results of Google's search engine using the parameters defined in the content codebook, it was determined that the business did not have a website, or did not have a website that was easily accessible by consumers. Webpages, blog pages, or other related Web content created by consumers to represent an experience with a given business, where a business website was not present, were coded as "other related items found". These did not include basic directory listings, but rather, actual content created by consumers on behalf of a particular business.



The Facebook search bar was used exclusively for collecting Facebook data, and the riding stable Facebook pages were searched for by staged search parameters, where additional parameters (found in Appendix A) were added after each unsuccessful search. If a business Facebook page was not found using the parameters outlined in the content codebook, it was determined that the business did not have a Facebook presence, or did not have a Facebook presence that was easily accessible by consumers.

The Twitter search bar was used exclusively for collecting Twitter data, and the riding stable Twitter accounts were searched for by variable search (found in Appendix A). New parameters were searched if a search did not return a result. If a business Twitter account was not found using the parameters outlined in the content codebook, it was determined that the business did not have an official Twitter presence, or did not have an official Twitter presence that was easily accessible by consumers. Though business mentions through consumer hash tags were not counted as an official Twitter presence, they were recorded and are included separately, but within the overall findings.

The content analysis Codebook (see Appendix A) and Coding Sheet (see Appendix B) can be found in the Appendix.

## **Results**

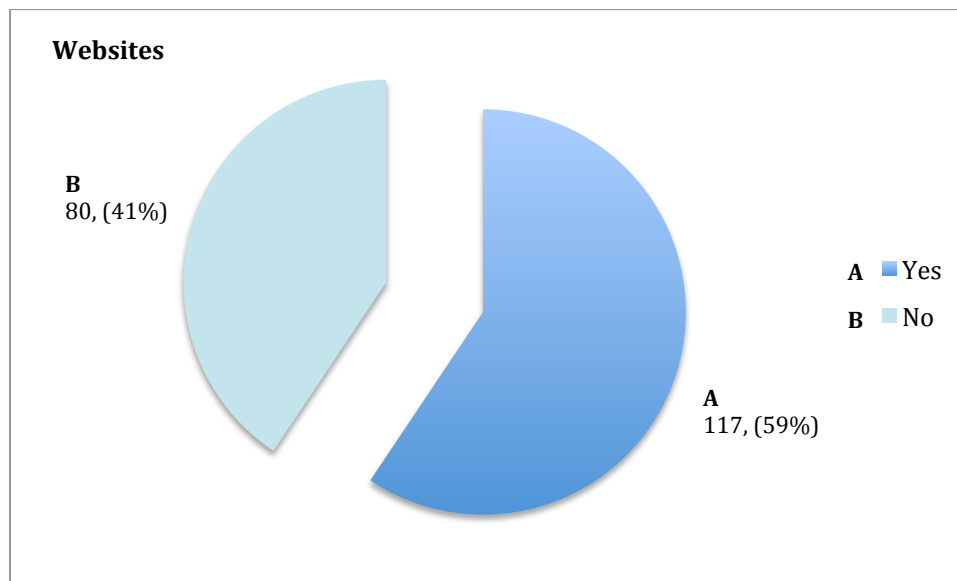
The following results address several website and social media usage trends among riding stables in New York State. The first area that was studied was the level of “presence” that a riding stable has on certain areas of the Internet.

**RQ1:** *What percentage of riding stables in New York State are currently utilizing websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market services?*

While determining the level of website presence among riding stables, only the top 10 results returned by Google's search engine were analyzed. It is possible that some riding stable websites existed beyond the top 10 results, however these websites are not as likely to be found by the consumer, and thus were not analyzed.

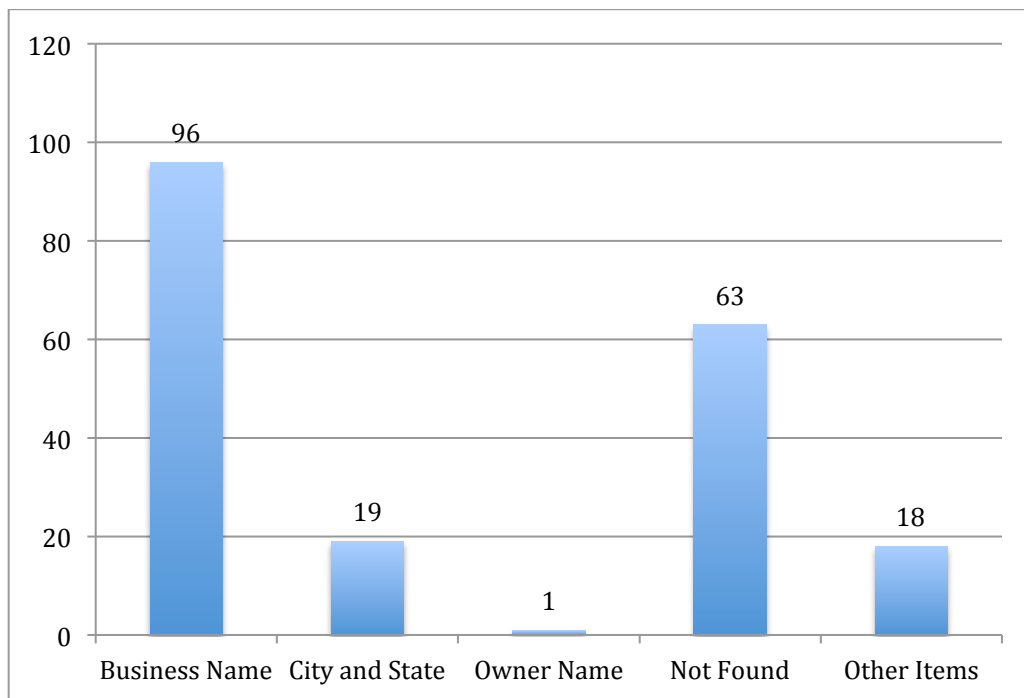
Of the websites that were found, 83% of those websites were located using only the riding stable business name as a search parameter. These riding stables have been effectively indexed by Google's search engine. Adding additional search parameters such as City and State or Owner Name was particularly effective in helping to identify riding stables that had very common names, where several riding stables with the same name existed in multiple locations across the United States.

Figure 1 displays the findings of the Web presence analysis. Of the 197 riding stables that were evaluated, 117 (59%) had websites, and 80 (41%) did not have websites.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of riding stables in NYS that have Websites

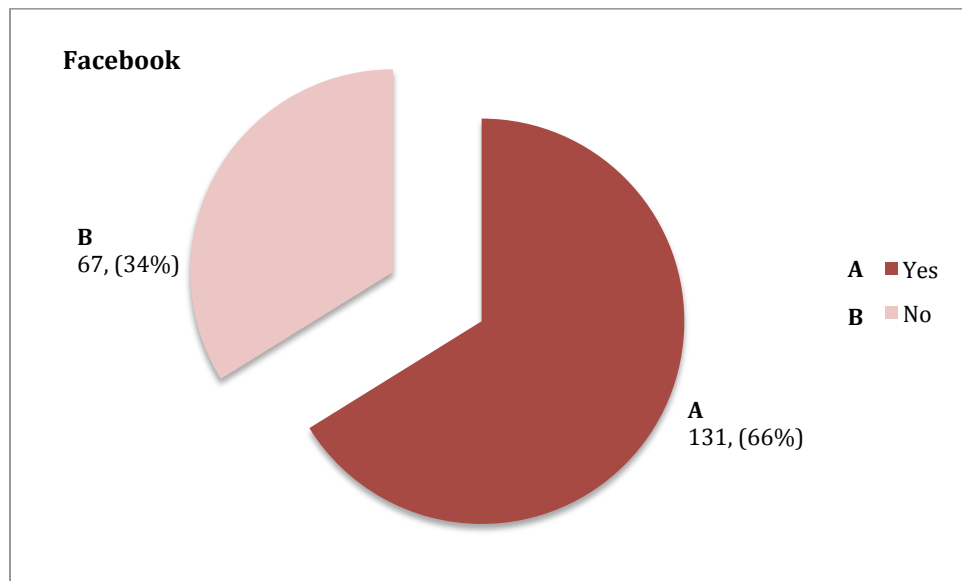
Of the websites found, 57% represented English riding stables, 6% represented Western riding stables, 18% represented English and Western (mixed-discipline) riding stables, and the disciplines of the remaining 19% could not be easily distinguished by information presented on the riding stable websites. Figure 2 displays the results of how each website was located.



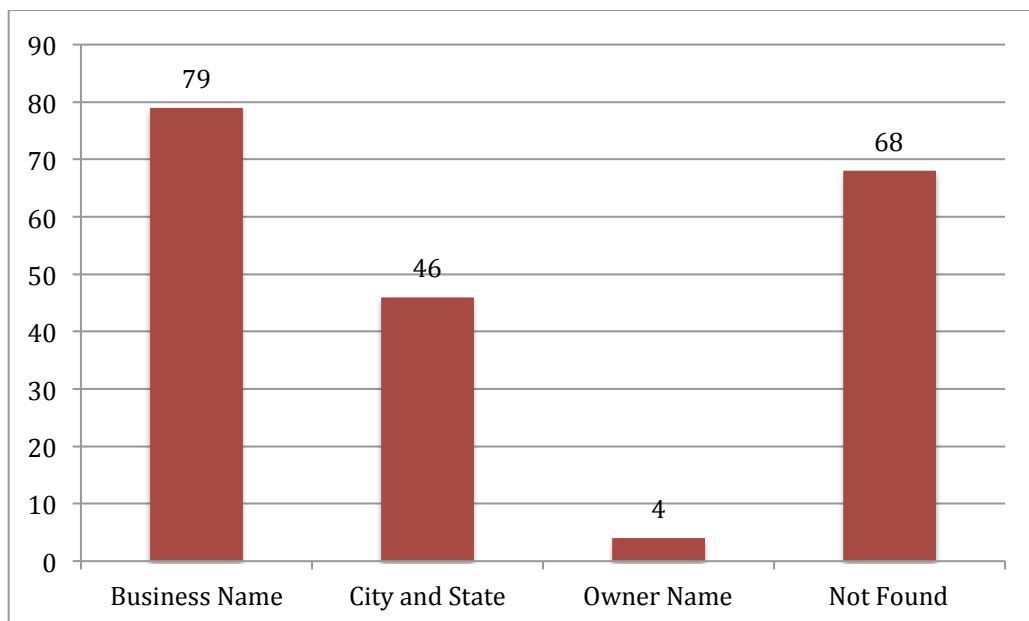
**Figure 2.** Method for locating riding stable Websites

Findings concluded that riding stables that have a Facebook presence in New York State exceed the number of riding stables who have a website presence by seven percent. The Business Name search parameter was also an effective means of locating riding stables through the Facebook search bar. There were a larger number of occurrences during the Facebook search process where the addition of City and State helped locate or differentiate the correct Facebook page from others with similar names. Of the riding stables with Facebook pages, 36% were not found until City and State were added as additional search parameters.

Figure 3 displays the findings of the Facebook presence analysis. Of the 197 riding stables that were evaluated, 131 (66%) had Facebook, and 67 (34%) did not have Facebook. Figure 4 displays the results of how each Facebook page was located.



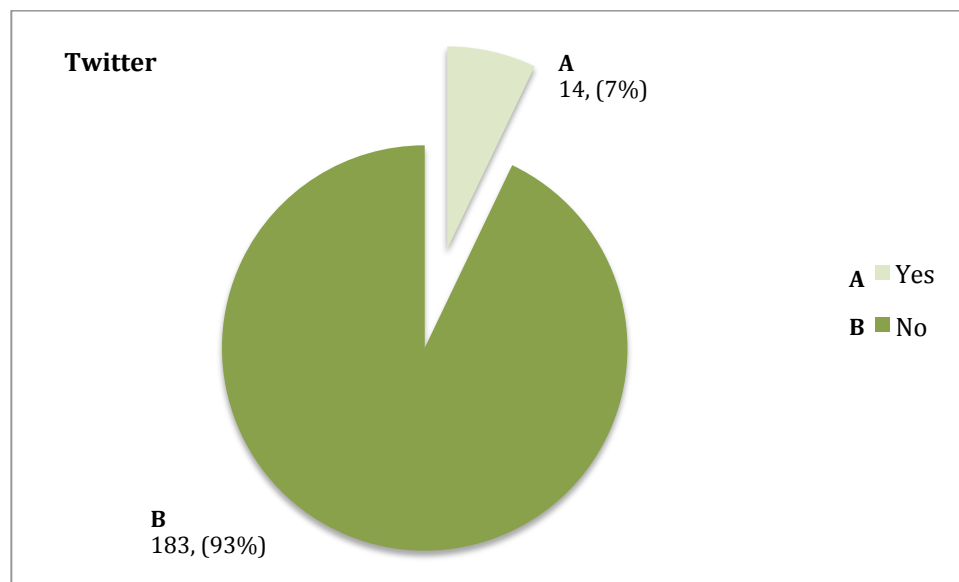
**Figure 3.** Percentage of riding stables in NYS with Facebook accounts



**Figure 4.** Method for locating riding stable Facebook pages

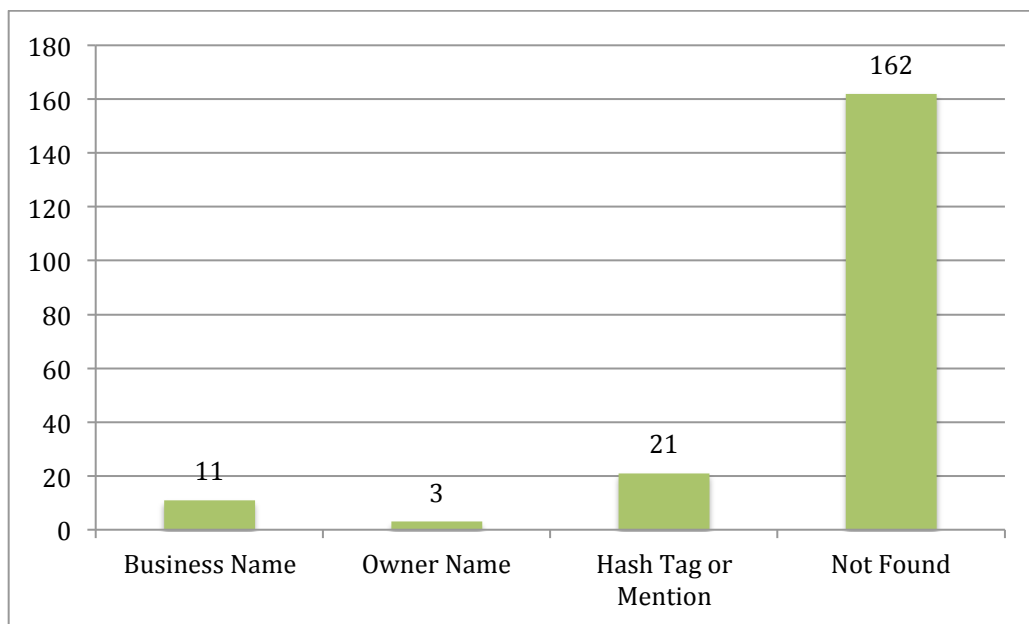
Of the three online marketing opportunities that were evaluated, findings concluded that Twitter was by far the least utilized resource among riding stables in New York State. It was noted that the search-ability of Twitter was not as user friendly as that of Google or Facebook. For example, users who created Twitter accounts using a name other than their business name, such as an abbreviation or acronym, were difficult to locate and thus may have been missed. It is assumed that the average consumer would have a similar experience if searching for a business on Twitter.

Of the 197 riding stables that were evaluated, only 14 (7%) had Twitter accounts, and 183 (93%) did not have Twitter accounts. Figure 5 displays the findings of the Twitter presence analysis.



**Figure 5.** Percentage of riding stables in NYS with Twitter accounts

In addition to the 14 riding stables that had Twitter accounts, business name mentions within hash tags on Twitter were utilized as an additional means for determining whether anyone was talking about a particular riding stable in Twitter. A total of 21 hash tags and business name mentions were found as a result of this search, concluding that while there was no official Twitter presence for these particular riding stables, some of their consumers were talking about the business through Twitter's micro-blogging channels. Figure 6 displays the results of how each Twitter presence was located.



**Figure 6.** Method for locating riding stable Twitter presence

After addressing Web, Facebook, and Twitter presence, certain aspects of how riding stables in New York State are using online marketing were analyzed.

**RQ2:** *In what ways are riding stables in New York state utilizing websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market services?*

Of the three online mediums examined, the extent to which riding stables in New York State are utilizing websites to promote services was examined in more depth than Facebook and Twitter. It was determined in advance of the research that List of Services, Pricing, Contact Information, Pictures of Facility, and Pictures of Clients were some of the elements that were important and more likely to appear as elements on most riding stable websites, thus their percentage of use was measured in the research.

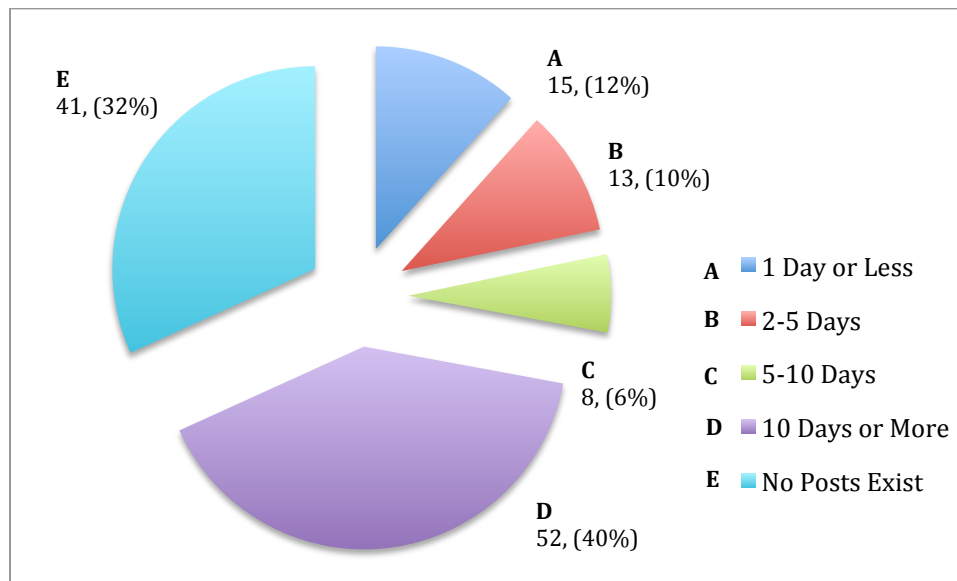
Website content that was easily accessible from the website homepage was evaluated to determine whether riding stables were communicating or marketing certain aspects of their business. Those seen as some of the more commonly searched for when investigating equestrian services were included in the analysis:

- List of Services (85%)
- Pricing (38%)
- Contact Information (93%)
- Pictures of Facility (60%)
- Pictures of Clients (78%)

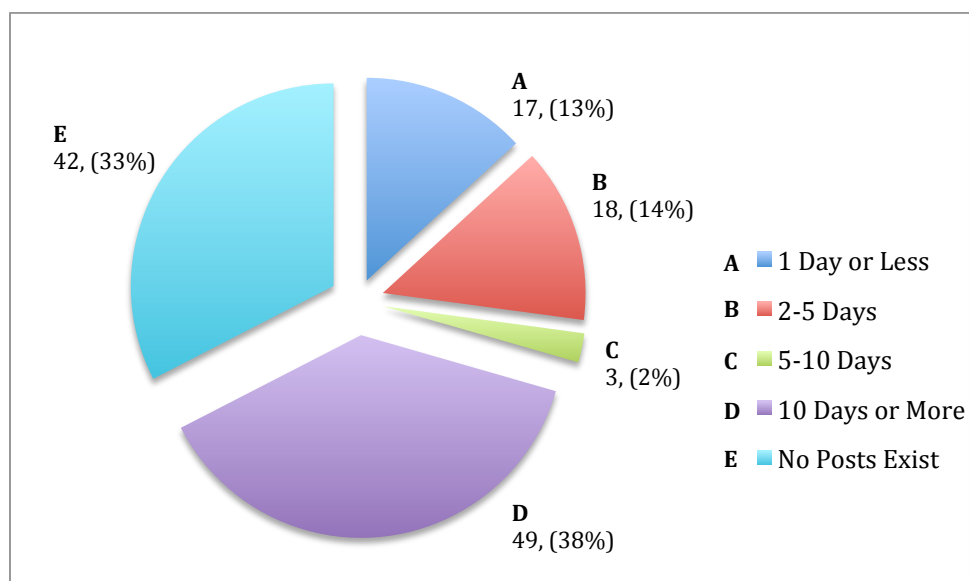
Of the 117 riding stables that had websites, contact information was apparent on the highest number of riding stable websites, with only 7% of websites not containing business contact information that was easily accessible from the homepage. List of Services was the next most commonly found component at 85%, followed by Pictures of Clients at 78%, and Pictures of Facility at 60%. The least commonly promoted element was service Pricing, with only 38% of riding stables sharing this information on their websites.



The Facebook pages were evaluated by date of last post by owner and date of last post by visitor/consumer to determine currency of information. Findings based on last date of owner post and last date of visitor post are shown in Figures 7 and 8.



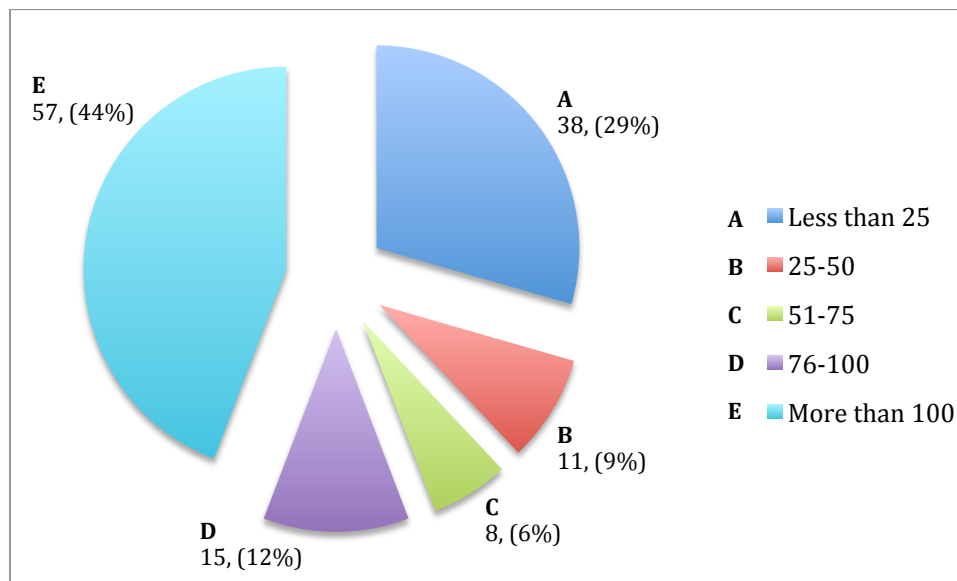
**Figure 7.** Date of last Facebook post by account owner



**Figure 8.** Date of last Facebook post by visitor

It is noted that there is very little difference between date of last Facebook owner post and date of last Facebook visitor post. It is likely that the postings made by the owner of the Facebook page may have driven the response rate of the visitors. Additionally, it is noted that although 131 Facebook pages were found, two of those pages produced repeated errors after the search, thus the above data is based on 129 Facebook pages. It was also noted that in some situations, Facebook pages were private, and thus the date of last post could not always be recorded.

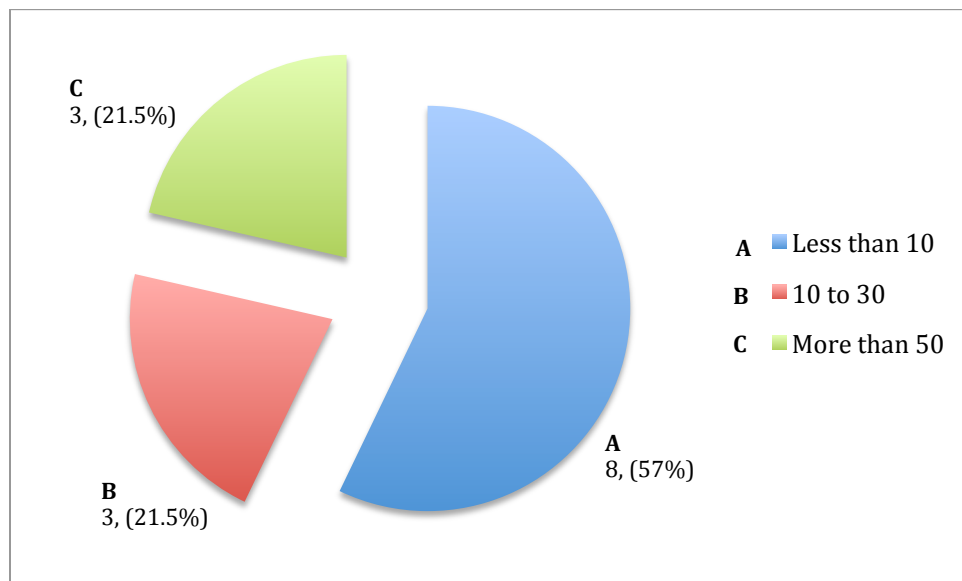
The number of Friends or page “Likes” that each Facebook page had was also measured, with 44% of pages boasting more than 100 Friends or page “Likes”. Of the total number of Facebook accounts located, 29% had less than 25 Friends or page “Likes”. It was observed that many of these pages were either new or appeared to have been somewhat abandoned by their owners. Others were very basic directory style listings where a Facebook presence had been reserved but never developed beyond the basic profile. The complete findings are shown in Figure 9.



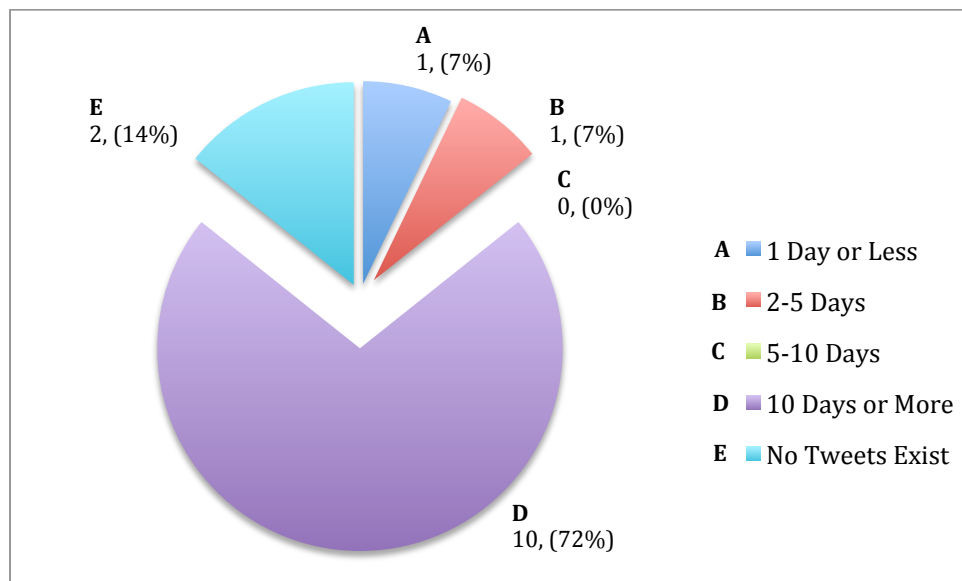
**Figure 9.** Number of Facebook Friends or Page “Likes”

In analyzing the data collected from Twitter, it was obvious that the majority of those who had Twitter accounts had created the account to experiment with the technology and did not appear to be actively using Twitter as a marketing tool. The study observed the number of Twitter followers as well as the timeframe in which the last Tweet was made by the account owner.

Of the 14 businesses that had Twitter accounts, 57% of those accounts had less than 10 followers, and 72% of those accounts had not tweeted in ten days or more. It was noted that a few of the accounts had not tweeted after their first tweet had posted, which in some cases was over a year ago. The full results are displayed in Figures 10 and 11.



**Figure 10.** Number of Twitter followers

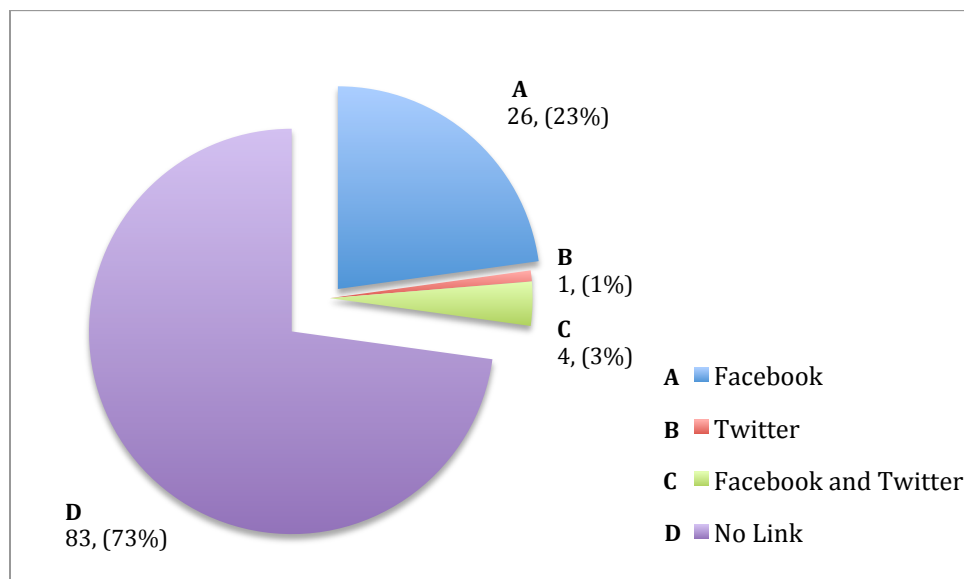


**Figure 11.** Days since last Tweet

After examining presence and basic usage of websites, Facebook, and Twitter by riding stables in New York State, the connections made from websites to Facebook and Twitter accounts were measured to determine whether there was a social media connection.

**RQ3:** *What percentage of riding stables are linking to Facebook and Twitter from the homepage of their existing website?*

The number of riding stables utilizing links from websites to Facebook was overwhelmingly larger than those utilizing links to Twitter. Of the websites found, 3% had a link to both Facebook and Twitter, 23% had a link to Facebook, and only 1% had a link to Twitter. It was noted that this link was typically, but not always, accessible from their website homepage. The remaining 73% of the riding stable websites that were found did not have any connection to either Facebook or Twitter. Results are shown in Figure 12.

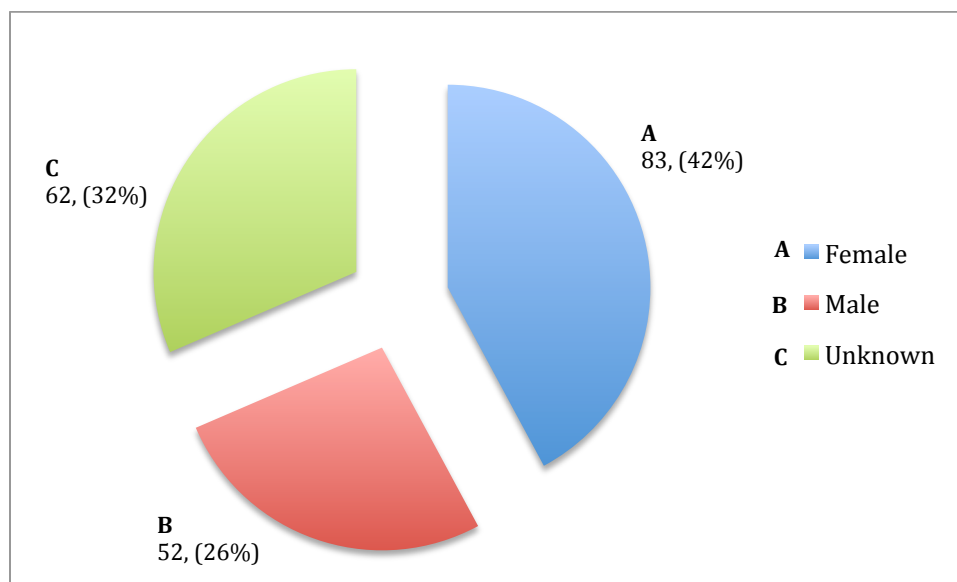


**Figure 12.** Website links to Facebook and Twitter

The final component that was measured during the research was owner gender, and whether there was any apparent difference in the frequency of men or women business owners using websites, Facebook, or Twitter.

**RQ4:** *Is there a correlation between owner gender demographics and use of websites, Facebook, and Twitter to market riding stable services in New York State?*

Of the 197 businesses that were evaluated, 42% of business owners were female, 26% were male, and the remaining 32% were unknown. Results are shown in Figure 13.



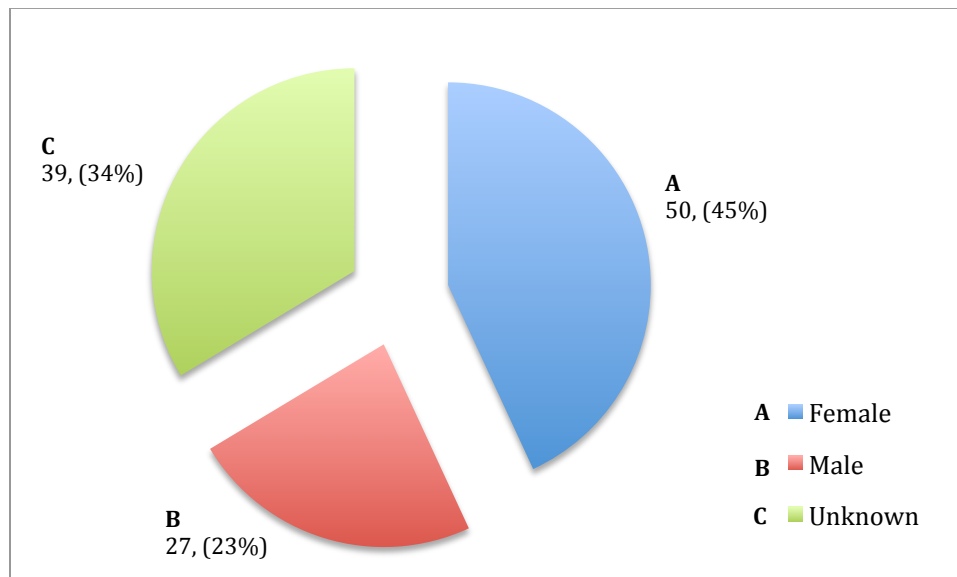
**Figure 13.** Riding stable owner gender demographics

Based on the findings, the riding stable industry in New York State appears to have a larger number of female business owners than male business owners, although a large percentage of owner gender remains unknown. Of the 83 known female business owners, 50 (60%) are using websites, 62 (75%) are using Facebook, and 9 (11%) are using Twitter. Of the 52 known

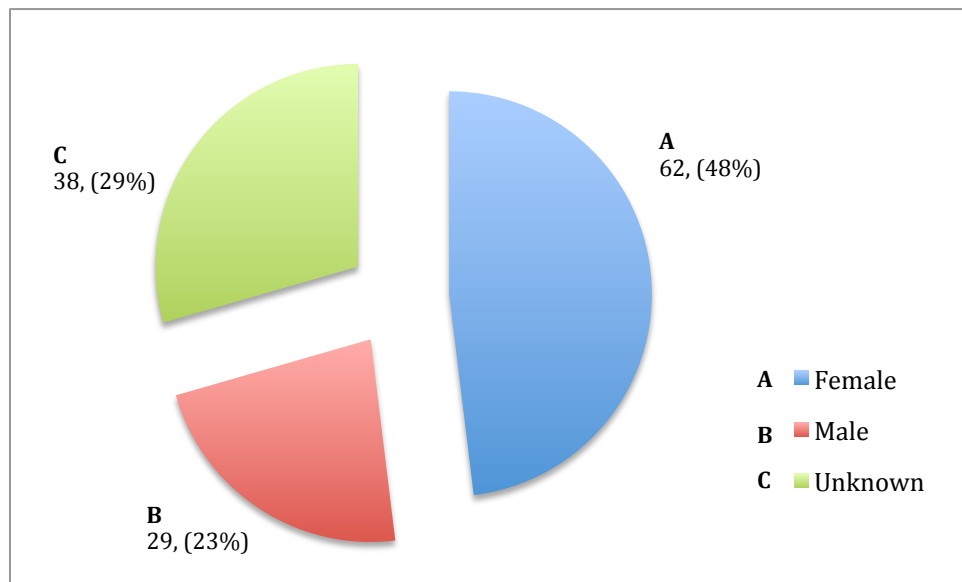
male business owners, 27 (52%) are using websites, 29 (56%) are using Facebook, and 2 (4%) are using Twitter.

The results show that the female riding stable business owner is utilizing websites, Facebook, and Twitter more frequently than the male riding stable business owner. According to the data gathered, female use of websites exceeds that of males by 8%, female use of Facebook exceeds that of males by 19%, and female use of Twitter exceeds that of males by 7%.

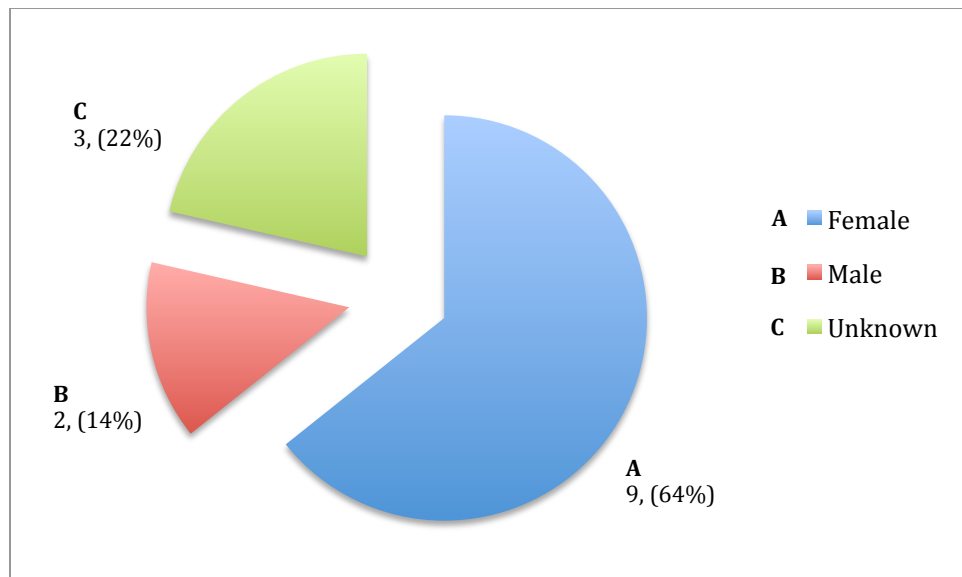
Figures 14-16 show the exact percentages of female and male website, Facebook, and Twitter use by riding stable business owners.



**Figure 14.** Website use by Gender



**Figure 15.** Facebook use by Gender



**Figure 16.** Twitter use by Gender



### **Discussion**

The research findings have led to interesting conclusions about the use of websites, Facebook, and Twitter among riding stables in New York State. Overall the findings indicate that this subset of the equine industry in New York State is currently quite active in their use of the Internet, with 59% of businesses using websites, 66% using Facebook, and 7% using Twitter. There is still room for improvement in percentage of use and strategic use, however, the general usage numbers are significantly higher than the 30% Internet use by farm businesses indicated in the literature review. This may be an indicator that riding stables are slightly more advanced in the adoption of the Internet and online marketing innovations than average farm businesses, or it may also be a reflection of the time that has passed between the date that the Agricultural Resource Management survey (2005) was distributed and present day.

Several interesting findings were uncovered when analyzing business websites, including most and least commonly found information. Contact information (email, phone, address) was the most commonly found information, appearing on 93% of websites. This finding was only surprising in that the result was not 100%, as it seems only logical that contact information would need to be available for a consumer to take action towards pursuing a service. Probably the more surprising finding was that only 38% of business websites listed pricing information, making it the least commonly found information among predetermined categories that were analyzed. Reasons behind lack of pricing information could be frequent price fluctuation, or perhaps some businesses may consider price listings to be a turnoff to their customers. For example, a customer may be willing to spend more money on an equine service once they have

had an opportunity to see or experience it in person as opposed to hearing about it only on a website. This could be one motivator for businesses not to post their prices.

Another interesting finding in the website research was the types and frequency of pictures found on business websites. The overall presence of pictures displaying customers and their horses exceeded the overall presence of facility pictures on business websites. It seems that facility pictures would assist in exemplifying quality, which could be considered a very important aspect of service selection. However, only 60% of websites contained images of their facility, while 78% of websites contained images of their clients and horses. Images of clients typically included riders and horses in competition or images exemplifying customer enjoyment and success. Perhaps the overwhelming presence of client pictures helps to exemplify the importance of creating an effective personal network of sorts. For example, riders may check back often to see photos of themselves and their friends, or may refer their friends and family to do the same.

Based on the Facebook findings, there appeared to be a trend in both currency and frequency of posts by page owners and visitors. On Facebook pages where the owners had posted recently, visitors had typically responded within the same timeframe as the owners. Posts by visitors in the scenario used in this research were more conversational, and thus, often occurred as a reply to an owner's post. This information could be helpful to other businesses considering use of social media such as Facebook, where "conversations" tend to form. It is noted that the activity of consumers seemed to be a direct reflection of the activity of a page owner or administrator. Based on this finding, the more activity an owner posts, the more activity

they may see in return from their clientele. Remembering that conversations are two-sided may be a helpful takeaway.

It was also noted during the study that many of the riding stables that used Facebook had other riding stables (their peers) following them in addition to their customers. One could speculate that these peer riding stables may be part of a local network of barns that utilize Facebook to communicate with one another, or are possibly observing the practices of similar businesses. This is also an important consideration for any business owner – if you are on Facebook, others (who may be your competitors or peers) may be keeping track of your activity. This is a way for other business owners not only to watch client interactions, but to also view information on business services, events, and professionalism.

Surprisingly, very few businesses chose to connect their websites to their social media resources through the form of a link on their website. According to the literature, social media may help generate conversation around a business, but to convert the social media activity into more customers, more sales, and ultimately more profit, businesses may need to send consumers back to their website for more information (Nicholson, 2011). Based on this information, it seems as though many riding stables are missing an opportunity to make this connection. Other small businesses should consider this when creating their own Internet marketing strategies. Creating marketing strategies with various components that become connected pieces of a whole could prove more beneficial than using just one method or the other.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study were limited specifically to riding stables within the equine industry in New York State. Given that New York State is one of the more heavily populated

parts of the equine industry, this may have resulted in different usage levels than would have been seen if the same research were performed in a less populated state. Findings were also limited to information that was collected within the selected research timeframe.

The research performed through this study had other limitations as well. The data collected was based on a content analysis, and thus the findings can be considered somewhat subjective. Since the researcher was familiar with the equine industry, that awareness may have also affected the content coding to some extent.

Additional components could have been added to the coding and analysis to produce more robust results. For example, more details about the type of content displayed on Facebook pages could have been gathered and compared, similar to what was done with the analysis of information on riding stable websites. This type of data gathering would have allowed for a more vigorous comparison of websites and Facebook as competing marketing resources.

Among the sample that was selected, it was also noted that there were some misclassified businesses on the list. The businesses that were deemed inappropriate were removed from the study, but may still have affected the overall numbers in some way, as they were reported inaccurately by the Research USA database.

The timeframe in which the study was performed could also be considered a limitation to some extent. Given the ever-changing nature of the Internet, especially social media or “Web 2.0” components, results may differ based on the timeframe in which they are collected. This may be specifically true in the case of Facebook and Twitter and the collection of owner/visitor recent postings or tweets.

### **Recommendations**

Future research may help to address some of the limitations listed above, which present a number of opportunities for further investigation. This study could easily be replicated in other states, or within other service industries. The coding design would only require minor modification to apply to industries outside of the equine industry. Adding a qualitative component, such as interviews with riding stable owners and managers, would allow the research to address more specific questions related to website and social media use. These qualitative studies could also include additional interview questions related to general business marketing practices.

Expanding the study to other service niche areas may produce useful marketing information for business owners in other industries. During the literature review, it was determined that several reports and surveys related to small business or general “business” use of social media and online resources exist, but little to no research exists on the same topic in relation to specific service industries.

Another suggestion would be to examine this or other service industries to see whether websites, Facebook, and Twitter are being branded similarly to assist in the creation of a strong brand identity. It was observed that very few businesses had taken the time to customize their Facebook or Twitter presence to the extent where it actually matched the brand or look of their website.

Additionally, there are a number of other social media resources that could be evaluated in addition to Facebook and Twitter. For example, many businesses are beginning to explore the

use of group service discount websites such as LivingSocial and Groupon. Research into these areas may unveil additional social media trends within the equine industry.

### **Conclusion**

This study has successfully uncovered existing website, Facebook, and Twitter trends among riding stables in New York State, revealing that 59% of the sample population is currently using websites as an online marketing resource, 66% are using Facebook, and 7% are using Twitter. While Twitter statistics are low, Facebook and websites statistics are closer to the industry standards for small business Web and social media usage. Most of the riding stables encompassed within this research are considered to be small businesses, with less than 50 employees, and income levels typically less than \$500,000 (Reference USA).

The average rate of website and social media adoption among small businesses in the United States continues to increase. As social media use continues to grow, the perceived urgency for small businesses to have websites may become less important in some ways. Social media has created a means for businesses to have an online presence without the need to staff an IT professional, or hire an interim web designer, saving business owners time and expense. Since lack of resources is often a common barrier to adoption of online marketing mediums, one can see where a social media platform such as Facebook might be considered a lower risk solution to creating an online presence.

Future trends point towards more consumers expecting to see an online presence, either in the form of a website or other social media, many of who will expect to see a mobile friendly presence. Many of the websites that were reviewed during this research were not constructed using a mobile friendly development process, which means that they will likely need to be

redesigned in the future. Small businesses who are thinking about expanding their online presence should take into consideration IT future trends such as the mobile web, and should also pay close attention to consumer expectations as the buyer market evolves along with our IT innovations.

Additionally, trends show that social media for small business marketing has begun to reach a tipping point, with only ten percent of small business owners indicating that they will not use social media in 2012, down from 24% in 2011, and 39% in 2010 (O'Brien, 2011). Research collected by Ad-ology also revealed that for the first time "improving customer experience" was ranked as one of the top benefits to using social media.

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### **Appendix A: Codebook**

For purposes of this study, websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts owned and operated by the sample group of riding stables were selected for analysis. The following codebook was utilized as a resource for performing the content analysis.

#### **Websites**

Units of analysis: Determining whether a riding stable has a website presence is one of the primary functions of this research. Coders should begin searching Google's search engine by (1) business name, and if the website is not found, continue searching by (2) business name, city and state, and finally (3) business name and owner name. If website is still not found, coder will determine the website (4) was not found, or list as (5) other related items found (includes single web pages or blog posts by consumers, not directory listings). Top 10 results (page one of search) returned by Google should be analyzed. Additional components such as marketing information, discipline, and links to social media will also be evaluated in a similar manner, moving down through each coding list. The marketing information question may have a multiple code answer.

How was website located?

- Code:
- 1 = Google search by business name
  - 2 = Google search by business name, city and state
  - 3 = Google search by business name and owner name
  - 4 = Website was not found
  - 5 = Other related items found

Which of the following marketing information was accessible from the homepage?

- Code:
- 1 = List of Services
  - 2 = Pricing
  - 3 = Contact information (e.g. email, phone, address)
  - 4 = Pictures of facility
  - 5 = Pictures of clients
  - 6 = N/A, Website was not found

Is the riding stable discipline distinguishable, and if so, what is it?

- Code:
- 1 = Yes, English
  - 2 = Yes, Western
  - 3 = Yes, Both English and Western
  - 4 = No, can't distinguish the discipline
  - 5 = N/A, Website was not found

Was there a link from the website to Facebook or Twitter?

- Code:
- 1 = Yes, Facebook
  - 2 = Yes, Twitter
  - 3 = Yes, Facebook and Twitter
  - 4 = No, there was no link
  - 5 = N/A, Website was not found

**Facebook**

Units of analysis: Determining whether a riding stable has a Facebook presence is one of the primary functions of this research. Coders should begin searching Facebook's search engine by (1) business name, and if the page is not found, continue searching by (2) business name, city and state, and finally (3) business name and owner name. If Facebook page is still not found, coder will determine the presence (4) was not found. Additional components such as last post by page owner and visitor, as well as number of followers (friends or likes) will also be evaluated in the same manner, moving down through each coding list.

How was Facebook page located?

- Code:
- 1 = Facebook search, found by business name
  - 2 = Facebook search, found by business name, city and state
  - 3 = Facebook search, found by business name and owner name
  - 4 = Facebook search, page was not found

When was the last Facebook posting by the page owner?

- Code:
- 1 = 1 day ago or less
  - 2 = 2-5 days ago
  - 3 = 5-10 days ago
  - 4 = 10 or more days ago
  - 5 = No posts exist
  - 6 = N/A page not found

When was the last Facebook posting by a visitor?

- Code:
- 1 = 1 day ago or less
  - 2 = 2-5 days ago
  - 3 = 5-10 days ago
  - 4 = 10 or more days ago
  - 5 = No posts exist
  - 6 = N/A page not found

How many followers (friends or likes) does the Facebook page have?

*Note: Some Facebook accounts will be created as pages or groups and will have pages “likes” and others will be created as user profile accounts and will have “friends”.*

- Code:
- 1 = Less than 25
  - 2 = 25-50
  - 3 = 51-75
  - 4 = 76-100
  - 5 = More than 100
  - 6 = N/A page not found

## **Twitter**

Units of analysis: Determining whether a riding stable has a Facebook presence is one of the primary functions of this research. Coders should begin searching Facebook’s search engine by



(1) business name, and if the account is not found, continue searching by (2) owner name, (3) hash tag mention of business name, and finally (4) hash tag mention of owner name. If Twitter account is still not found, coder will determine the presence (5) was not found. Additional components such as number of followers and date of last tweet will also be evaluated in the same manner, moving down through each coding list.

How was Twitter account located?

*Note: For owner-based responses, coder must be able to connect the owner name to the business by some noticeable means (information in tweet, account name, etc).*

- Code:
- 1 = Twitter search, account found by business name
  - 2 = Twitter search, account by owner name
  - 3 = Twitter search, hash tag or mention of business name
  - 4 = Twitter search, hash tag or mention of owner name
  - 5 = No Twitter presence found

How many followers does the Twitter profile have?

- Code:
- 1 = Less than 10
  - 2 = 10-30
  - 3 = 30-50
  - 4 = More than 50
  - 5 = N/A, No Twitter presence found

When was the last Tweet posted?

- Code:
- 1 = 1 day ago or less
  - 2 = 2-5 days ago
  - 3 = 5-10 days ago
  - 4 = 10 or more days ago
  - 5 = No Tweets exist
  - 6 = N/A, No Twitter presence found

**Appendix B: Coding Sheet**

The following coding sheet can be used to perform analysis on the website, Facebook, and Twitter presence of each riding stable in the research sample.

A. Coder \_\_\_\_\_

B. Coding Date \_\_\_\_\_

C. Business Name \_\_\_\_\_

D. Website URL \_\_\_\_\_

E. How was the website located?

\_\_\_\_\_ (1) Google search by business name

\_\_\_\_\_ (2) Google search by business name, city and state

\_\_\_\_\_ (3) Google search by business name and owner name

\_\_\_\_\_ (4) Website was not found

\_\_\_\_\_ (5) Other related items found

F. Which of the following marketing information was accessible from the homepage?

\_\_\_\_\_ (1) List of Services

\_\_\_\_\_ (2) Pricing

\_\_\_\_\_ (3) Contact information (e.g. email, phone, address)

\_\_\_\_\_ (4) Pictures of facility

\_\_\_\_\_ (5) Pictures of clients

\_\_\_\_\_ (6) N/A, Website was not found

G. Is the riding stable discipline distinguishable, and if so, what is it?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Yes, English
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) Yes, Western
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) Yes, both English and Western
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) No, can't distinguish the discipline
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) N/A, Website was not found

H. Was there a link from the website to Facebook or Twitter?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Yes, Facebook
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) Yes, Twitter
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) Yes, Facebook and Twitter
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) No, there was no link
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) N/A, Website was not found

I. Facebook URL \_\_\_\_\_

J. How was Facebook page located?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Facebook search, found by business name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) Facebook search, found by business name, city and state
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) Facebook search, found by business name and owner name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) Facebook search, page was not found

K. When was the last Facebook posting by the page owner?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) 1 day ago or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) 2-5 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) 5-10 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) 10 or more days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) No posts exist
- \_\_\_\_\_ (6) N/A, page not found

L. When was the last Facebook posting by a visitor?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) 1 day ago or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) 2-5 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) 5-10 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) 10 or more days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) No posts exist
- \_\_\_\_\_ (6) N/A, page not found

M. How many followers (friends or likes) does the Facebook page have?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Less than 25
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) 25-50
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) 51-75
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) 76-100
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) More than 100
- \_\_\_\_\_ (6) N/A, page not found

N. Twitter URL \_\_\_\_\_

O. How was the Twitter account located?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Twitter search, account found by business name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) Twitter search, account by owner name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) Twitter search, hash tag or mention of business name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) Twitter search, hash tag or mention of owner name
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) No Twitter presence found

P. How many followers does the Twitter profile have?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) Less than 10
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) 10-30
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) 30-50
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) More than 50
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) N/A, No Twitter presence found

Q. When was the last Tweet posted by this profile?

- \_\_\_\_\_ (1) 1 day ago or less
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2) 2-5 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (3) 5-10 days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (4) 10 or more days ago
- \_\_\_\_\_ (5) No Tweets exist
- \_\_\_\_\_ (6) N/A, No Twitter presence found

### **Appendix C: Equine Terminology**

**English** - a riding discipline, in which a flat saddle and traditional hunt attire are worn, often associated with hunter/jumper, dressage, eventing, and thoroughbred racing

**Equine Industry** - the larger industry of equine, or horse-related businesses, including but not limited to, riding stables

**Riding Stable** – (aka: horseback riding stable) for purposes of this study, is defined as an equestrian business that offers horse boarding and riding lessons services at a minimum, also further defined by the search terms Stable, Equestrian Center, or Riding Academy in the Research USA database

**Western** - a riding discipline in which horned deep seat saddles are worn by the horse, often associated with working farms, cowboys, rodeos, barrel racing, and team penning